

September 15, 2004: CPCs: USCIRF Applauds Designation of Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea

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Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the announcement of Secretary of State Powell of the designation of Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) for severe religious freedom violations. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), which created the USCIRF, requires that the President or his designee, the Secretary of State, explicitly name those countries that are the most egregious violators of religious freedom and designate them as "countries of particular concern." The IRFA additionally requires that the Administration take action to oppose religious freedom violations in these countries. The USCIRF also welcomes the Secretary of State's redesignation of Burma, China, Iran, North Korea, and Sudan as CPCs, and the release of the State Department's Report on International Religious Freedom. "The Commission applauds especially that Saudi Arabia has been added to the U.S. government's list of the world's most egregious violators of religious freedom. The Commission has been recommending that Saudi Arabia be designated a CPC since the Commission was formed in 1999. This has been based not only on the Saudi government's violations of religious freedom within its own borders, but also based on reports of its propagation and export of an ideology of religious hate and intolerance throughout the world," said Commission Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "All individuals, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, are denied freedom of conscience and belief in Saudi Arabia. This, together with the Saudi government's funding and global propagation of a particular brand of Islam, impedes the development of voices of toleration and debate within the Islamic tradition," Bansal said. Since the Commission's inception, it has sought to increase public attention on Saudi Arabia. In the past year, the Commission: recommended Saudi Arabia be designated a CPC for the fifth time; issued a policy brief on Saudi Arabia that includes USCIRF recommendations for the President, Secretary of State, and Congress; proposed and then welcomed the announcement of a General Accounting Office (GAO) study on Saudi Arabia's funding of an ideology promoting violence and intolerance globally; applauded the resolution introduced by Senators Susan M. Collins (R-ME) and Charles E. Schumer (D-NY) urging Secretary Powell to designate Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern" and calling on the government of Saudi Arabia to cease its support globally for a religious ideology that explicitly promotes hatred and intolerance; held a hearing on Capitol Hill; and published an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal. The Commission also applauds the designation of Vietnam, a country recommended for CPC status by the Commission since 2001. In the past two years, religious freedom conditions have deteriorated in several key areas, including for ethnic Montagnard and Hmong Christians, the leaders of the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, and "house church" Protestants, all of whom face arrests, detentions, discrimination and, in some areas, forced renunciations of faith. "For its active repression of religious freedom in the past and for the government of Vietnam's failure to respond to the international community's repeated requests to address ongoing violations of the internationally-recognized right to freedom of religion or belief, Vietnam clearly warrants CPC designation," said Bansal. The State Department's acceptance of the Commission's recommendation of CPC designation for Eritrea is welcomed. The government of Eritrea in the past two years has embarked on a campaign against various religious groups, including through the closure of all houses of worship not belonging to officially recognized religious denominations, the arrest of participants at prayer meetings and other gatherings, and the imprisonment of armed forces members found in possession of certain religious literature. "The CPC designation is the beginning of focused diplomatic activity on religious freedom and not the end," said Bansal. In addition to CPC designation, the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) stipulates that the U.S. government take active steps with CPC countries to address violations and promote freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. However, since the passage of IRFA, for every country named a CPC in previous years, the only official action taken by any U.S. administration has been to invoke already existing sanctions rather than to take any additional action pursuant to IRFA. Moreover, the State Department has not once to date submitted to the Congress the required evaluation of the effectiveness of prior actions against CPCs. "This past disregard of IRFA requirements represents a serious failure in U.S. foreign policy. This year, for the first time since the passage of IRFA, countries have been designated as CPCs that do not have already existing sanctions assigned to them. Now that CPC designations have been made, we look forward to working with the State Department in formulating the statutorily required responses to these violations," Bansal said. The Commission remains troubled that Turkmenistan in particular has not been given the CPC designation it so clearly merits. "The State Department's own reports have consistently concluded that religious freedom conditions continue to deteriorate in Turkmenistan, a highly repressive country whose leader is currently imposing a state religion based on his own personality cult," Bansal said. The Commission also regrets that Secretary Powell did not designate as CPCs India* and Pakistan, which the Commission recommended for designation in February 2004. * Commissioners Bansal, Chaput, Gaer, and Young dissented from the Commission's recommendation that India be designated a country of particular concern (CPC). Their separate opinion with respect to India was attached to the Commission's February 2004 letter to Secretary Powell concerning the Commission's CPC recommendations.

Preeta D. Bansal, Chair

- Felice D. Gaer, Vice Chair Nina Shea, Vice Chair Patti Chang Archbishop Charles J. Chaput Khaled Abou El Fadl Richard Land Bishop Ricardo Ramirez Michael K. Young Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio Joseph R. Crapa, Executive

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